

Designated Port Areas: Flexible Protection for a Finite Resource

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When we think of the shrinking availability of finite coastal resources, we usually think about pristine areas like salt marshes and barrier beaches. Images of gritty industrial ports—with diesel exhaust from ships and tugs, heavy equipment unloading cargo, and a din from trucks and rail cars moving about—don't typically jump to mind. But, with the ever-increasing pressure for residential and commercial development along the Commonwealth's coast, working waterfronts are indeed a threatened public resource.

Almost 25 years ago the Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management (CZM) developed a policy to help maintain existing port infrastructure, which was built over the years at great public expense. The policy protects and promotes appropriate marine industrial development in port areas with key industrial attributes, such as deep-water channels, established rail and transportation links, and public utility services conducive to industry. Massachusetts' 11 Designated Port Areas (DPAs) are the cornerstone of this policy. These DPAs provide a home for industries that depend on access to the coast and are located in Gloucester, Salem, Beverly, Lynn, Mystic River, Chelsea Creek, East Boston, South Boston, Weymouth/Fox River, New Bedford-Fairhaven, and Fall River/Mt. Hope Bay.

CZM established the DPA program in 1978 after extensive consultation with municipal planners and leaders of the marine business community. The following year, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) incorporated the program into its Waterways regulations, adopting rules that prevent development in DPAs that has the effect of excluding water-dependent industries. The types of development that conflict with maritime industrial use include condominiums and other residential development, hotels, and recreational boating facilities. This approach is critical—once space for water-dependent industry is lost to other development, it is virtually irretrievable. Creating new infrastructure in other areas requires dredging deep channels, altering natural shorelines with extensive fill and structures, and connecting into existing transportation and utility networks. Such measures are prohibitively costly in both monetary and environmental terms.

For Massachusetts to take maximum advantage of future economic opportunities in the marine industrial sector, therefore, what remains of the industrialized coast must be preserved, while new maritime industry is promoted. DPAs are a flexible and effective tool for accomplishing these goals. DPAs are not treated as pure land banks where space not being used for water-dependent industry is off limits to other productive enterprises. Instead, the regulations simply prevent DPA parcels from being used in ways that will diminish the capacity of the DPA to support maritime development in the long run. The result can be a mix of maritime industry with general commercial and industrial activities, as well as safe and interesting public accessways interspersed along the industrial waterfront. Thoughtful and flexible DPA planning is the key to ensuring maximum benefits, where current economic development and public use does not preclude future maritime opportunities.